What is Claimed is:

1. A method of conducting an online auction on a communications network, the method comprising:

a first user terminal generating an offer to sell or to buy an item in accordance with first offer criteria;

a second user terminal generating an offer to buy or to sell a corresponding item in accordance with second offer criteria;

comparing the offer criteria to match an offer to sell and an offer to buy if any or all of their criteria match;

in response to a match between the offers, opening a peer to peer communication channel between the user terminals that made the matching offers; and conducting an auction between those user terminals via the communication channel.

- 2. The method of Claim 1, further comprising using the criteria of an offer to search for offers with matching criteria.
- 3. The method of Claim 2, wherein the search is conducted on a central database accessible by the user terminals, to which database the offers are transmitted.
- 4. The method of Claim 3, wherein the database is associated with a server to which the user terminals are clients.
- 5. The method of Claim 4, wherein comparison and matching of offer criteria are performed at the server end.
- 6. The method of Claim 2, wherein the search is conducted across the communications network of which the user terminals are a part.

- 7. The method of Claim 6, wherein an offer is broadcast by a user terminal to other user terminals on the network.
- 8. The method of Claim 6, wherein an offer is sent by a user terminal to a group of other user terminals defined by the sending user terminal.
- 9. The method of Claim 8, wherein the offer is forwarded by user terminals of the group to other user terminals or to other groups of user terminals.
- 10. The method of Claim 7, wherein comparison and matching of offer criteria are performed by a user terminal that receives an offer from another user terminal.
- 11. The method of Claim 10, wherein the received offer is compared with an offer generated by and stored by the user terminal that receives the offer.
- 12. The method of Claim 1, wherein an offer is stored in readiness for comparison and matching with a subsequent offer.
 - 13. The method of Claim 12, wherein the offer is stored for a timeout period.
- 14. The method of Claim 1, wherein the offers are generated by software agents resident on the respective user terminals.
- 15. The method of Claim 14, wherein a software agent searches for matching offers across the communications network.
- 16. The method of Claim 15, wherein a software agent receives, compares and matches offers.

- 17. The method of Claim 14, wherein a software agent opens the peer to peer communication channel between user terminals in response to a match between offers.
- 18. The method of Claim 14, wherein a software agent creates an auction on a user terminal.
- 19. The method of Claim 18, wherein the software agent runs the auction as a background task on the desktop of the user terminal.
 - 20. The method of Claim 14, wherein a seller agent makes an offer to sell an item.
- 21. The method of Claim 20, wherein the seller agent receives bids for the item on its user's behalf.
- 22. The method of Claim 21, wherein the seller agent responds to bids automatically on its user's behalf.
- 23. The method of Claim 21, wherein the seller agent responds to bids in accordance with real time instructions of its user.
- 24. The method of Claim 14, wherein a buyer agent makes an offer to buy an item.
- 25. The method of Claim 24, wherein the buyer agent bids for an item during the auction.
- 26. The method of Claim 25, wherein the buyer agent bids automatically on its user's behalf.